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Narrative re-scripting: Reconciling past and present lives

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Introduction

In this article I use an auto/biographical approach, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of biography and autobiography, the other and the self, in relation to the co-production of blog posts with Matthew (a 22-year-old criminalised individual referred to a resettlement scheme by probation). This enables an exploration of the individual and the social or the private troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959) related to the presentation of the self in everyday life (Goffman 1959). Through analysis of Matthew's narratives and photographs I consider ways in which we generate a sense of self in the present through the stories we tell, and how these simultaneously articulate and rearticulate the past. These auto/biographical stories are important constituents of the *sociological imagination* providing as they do important links between individual biography and history (Mills 1959). Moreover, memory as Arendt reminds us, is a 'storehouse of time' (Arendt 1996:15). It provides an endless

opportunity for the making and remaking of selves in the present. Our memories are always contextual, relational and open to interpretation. They are refracted and (re)affirmed under the light of new information and/or through social interaction. Memory therefore informs the present but remains temporal, fleeting and in need of reaffirmation. It only ever captures an essence of the past viewed and reviewed through a contemporary lens (Parsons 2015, Parsons 2019).

In auto/biographical storytelling individuals draw upon what Mill's (1959) refers to as common vocabularies, which reflect the contemporary milieu and are social as well as individual. In neo-liberal societies, narcissistic individualism is a key feature, consumer capitalism has cultural dominance and responsibility for success or failure is placed firmly in the hands of the individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This has an impact on auto/biographical storytelling for those with alternative life trajectories or when dealing with biographical disruption or trauma (Bury 1982). Indeed, for individuals having a story to tell is often related to biographical disruptions, or ruptures in expectations (Reissman 2008). In medical sociology for example Frank (1995) outlines ways in which stories dealing with disruptions in health status fall into four types of illness narrative. The 'chaos' narrative outlines the emotional anxiety caused by loss of health status, the 'restitution' narrative is about how the individual copes with the condition, the 'quest' narrative concerns the search for a cure and in the 'testimony' narrative individuals reflect on what has been gained or lost by the experience (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2010:49). In criminology Maruna (2001) discusses the ways in which 'ex-convicts' reform and rebuild their lives through a form of narrative re-scripting of the past, through the articulation of what he refers to as redemption scripts, as he claims:

The way each of us views our own history is interesting not only because of what it reveals about our personality and our background; *this subjective autobiography actually shapes our future choices and behaviour* (Maruna, 2001:05, emphasis in the original)

This reinforces the need for a re-articulation of the past in light of an imagined future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018). Moreover, Maruna (2001) claims that what is common amongst the narratives of those desisting from crime is a 'wilful, cognitive distortion' that enables them to move on from their past and make good. He adds:

...desisters express an exaggerated sense of purpose and unrealistically high degree of control over their future that bears little resemblance to the harsh realities of their own recent past, but contradiction is key to abstinence. (Maruna 2001:09).

Prior to introducing some of Matthew's narratives and photographs, I outline some of the background and context, with details relating to the contemporary criminological landscape, the Resettlement Scheme (RS) and The Photographic electronic-Narrative (PeN) project, as well as methods.

Background and Context

The criminological landscape

'Transforming Rehabilitation' is a public issue never far from the UK government's political agenda, as reoffending costs the economy an estimated £13 billion (MoJ 2013). This tends to be interpreted in terms of a problem of 'personal rehabilitation', rather than institutional or ideological failings regarding social integration and social justice (Burke et al 2019). There is considerable research on prisoners in prison and the 'pains of imprisonment', since the publication of Sykes influential work in the *Society of Captives* (1958). Although, little exists on prisoners working outside of 'captivity'. There has also been a great deal of interest in the 'pains of release' due to high rates of recidivism. Post-release models in this context have either focussed on deficits, i.e. on 'offenders' lacking in abilities/capabilities/resources to manage themselves, or desistance, which builds on human and social capital towards a 'good lives model' that incorporates redemption scripts and an internalisation of generativity, which is the desire to do something for others, a final aspect of 'making good' (Johns 2018, Maruna 2001, Rocque, 2017). Thus, desistance theories, defined as 'the voluntary termination of serious criminal participation' (Shover 1996:121), have developed as a challenge to rehabilitation paradigms that focus on public risk and highly individualised psychological interventions (McNeill 2006, McNeill 2012, Owers 2011). Generally, whilst 'there is no agreed theoretical or operational definition of desistance' (Weaver and McNeill 2010:37), it is acknowledged that desistance is social as well as individual; it is not just a 'private' business (McNeil 2012). It is essentially a social process of maintaining a crime free life (Weaver 2016), whether this is understood as a 'zig-zag' journey or a rhizomatic non-linear one (Phillips 2017). Moreover, that desistance from crime should incorporate four areas of rehabilitation; personal, social, judicial and moral (McNeill 2012). Also, that 'softer emotions', such as hope, aspiration and cultural belonging (Farrell et al 2010:555) are significant for change. Indeed, for an individual habitus to change it needs to be exposed to a range of new experiences and environments in order to develop alternative dispositions, expectations and aspirations (Bourdieu 1984, Reay 2004). In this context the voices and experiences of criminalised individuals are vital in developing and building 'plans for desistance at a personal and local level' (McNeill 2012:13).

inter-related aims of the PeN project, firstly to enable trainees to create a visual, self-reflexive narrative of their desistance (or resistance) journey and secondly to engage the wider community with this journey through the co-creation of blog posts that encourage dialogue between trainees and the wider community (<https://penprojectRS.org/>). I have written elsewhere on how the PeN project works as a virtual social media space and relational arena for ‘bearing witness’ to desistance (Parsons 2018b).

Although, each desistance narrative is unique, it is often also ‘faltering, uncertain and punctuated by relapse’ (McNeill and Weaver 2010); it is not linear or predictable. It is argued that desistance is ‘perhaps best understood as part of the individual’s journey towards successful integration into the community’ after punishment (McNeill 2012:13). It is how trainees understand and reflect on this journey that is pertinent, alongside the social recognition and acceptance of the reformed individual by the community (McNeil 2012:18). Indeed, in moving from ‘offender’ to ‘non-offender’ identities, social reaction is important, the change in behaviour needs to be recognised by others and reflected back (McNeill and Weaver 2010). This is done on a daily basis at the RS between staff, volunteers and trainees, and the PeN project contributes to this positive reinforcement by enabling supporters and the wider community to be more involved.

Methods

The narratives and photographs in this paper are drawn from the PeN project, which started in the autumn of 2016 as part of an ISRF mid-career fellowship. It uses a simplified version of PAR to involve trainees as active subjects who work with the researcher and are involved in decision-making processes (Minkler and Wallestein 2003). It utilises a modified ‘photovoice’ technique, which has given vulnerable groups access to artistic and creative methods of expression and built skills in disadvantaged communities (Wang et al 2000). This is a subjectivist position in which the researcher and subject interact to create and share understandings, which emphasises the co-constructed nature of narrative. Subjectivity is therefore always under construction; it is an assemblage, following a Deleuzian perspective, the ‘qualitative researcher is a bricoleur, piecing together, describing, analysing and focussing on the conceptual and experiential’ (Johns 2018:101). Here ‘photos [can] enable research participants to communicate dimensions of experience that might have remained unsaid in verbal interviews’ (McLeod, 2017:32).

For the PeN process, trainees choose a pseudonym and take photographs at the RS on a regular basis. These photographs are then discussed during informal interviews led by trainees who chat about what they have been doing at the RS in the weeks preceding, as well as anything of concern/interest to them. They last from 40-120 minutes, with some trainees

these environments. At the time of this interview and throughout his time at the RS Matthew is 'sofa surfing' or sleeping on his aunt's couch in the living room once everyone else has gone to bed. In relation to his time at the RS he says:

I've been here for 2 years. I've done 5 months and then 6 months. I've been involved with the RS of and on, over the last two years. I like driving the dumper truck. I'm very good at crashing into the poly tunnel, mate I could sell anything to anybody. I'm here because I want to be here. I don't have to be here now. If it wasn't for the RS I'd be sat in a prison cell, if it wasn't for the RS, I would I'd be sat in a prison cell or a lot of trouble. My garlic bread is nice actually...

It is notable that Matthew is at the RS out of choice, although some of the hours spent there contribute to a community order from probation. This is reminiscent of neo-liberal discourses of choice, where the notion of choice becomes mandatory, and a peculiar form of freedom (Smith and Rayman 2015). Here Matthew highlights things he is good at, such as driving the dumper truck, selling products at the shop on site and cooking. Later there is a blog post on cooking called 'What's cooking?': <https://penprojectlandworks.org/category/matthew/>

Matthew says:

The thing is my favourite country is Italy, my favourite food Italian, my favourite car Italian, best looking women in the world Italian, but I just like all things Italian, I love the Italian accent, I love it, Me and R [another trainee at the RS] smoked like two ounces of weed in a night, I made him pass out, he woke up in the morning and I'm still sat there and he's looking at me, fucked out my head like, I was in care, he was in care you know and if I can help him, to the best I can, I will, but you know, I'm very mature for a 22-year-old, you know what I mean?

In this excerpt and in the blog post Matthew demonstrates a kind of generativity (Maruna 2001) doing for others, especially those with similar experiences to his. Matthew has been in 52 foster/care homes. This is one of the first photographs Matthew takes of the project and forms part of his blog post 'Cover Photo', he comments:

I reckon that should be my cover photo. I think that's mint because you've got all the chickens in there and yeah, but I wouldn't mind getting on top of the porta-cabin roof or even getting on top of this

aunt's mobile number. The next blog post is called 'choices' and draws on an interview around these photographs:



I'm doing a mural, and it's basically it's a path which splits into two and it's all about your decisions, like choices, like you've got the left path which is crime and all the shit and you've got the right path which is you know trying to make a change and then when it goes in here, inside there, you'll see the path there splits again, and then you've got the right side, which you can stay doing what you're doing, like well, not doing what you're doing, like where I am now yeah, which comes off level, well, which comes off down this way a bit, but if you go in on the right like, you're on the benefits, and you're trying to sort shit out and then you've got another path which comes up, which is your path with job, your own place, mortgage, and then yeah sort of thing, depending on what choice you make depends on where your life goes, basically, yeah, because that door's open yeah, in the prison system the people are so used to closing doors on people, open the door you know, let them have a chance to walk through that door you know, it's kinda, it's trying to go positive, [it's called] choices, it's a door that's open on a door.

Matthew's notion of choice adheres to contemporary neo-liberal conceptualisations of responsible individualism, life choices are clearly in the hands of the individual.

I like this [the windows in the cob wall], it's alright that innit, let's get a photo out of each one. I've got my family, which is anutie Mo, my dad, Jacqueline, Jasmine, Hannah, Jamie, Jade, Joshua yeah and then all my RS family you know, I've been out here for like two years now, you know so I've got to know people and people's got to know me...

In this image and dialogue Matthew is making connections between real and imagined family formations. This social interaction and acceptance are important to him. Later he says:

I've got one bag, I've been living out of a bag for like what, like two years, I've been living out of one bag for like two years, everything I own can fit into my little rucksack, everything, it doesn't bother me packing, 'cos I've done it plenty of times...

My nan died when I was 11, she drowned in the bath, she had a stroke and drowned in a care home. I was in school and I can remember them coming in, police, social services, and then it suddenly dawned on me the next day, everybody was like, sorry to hear the news, sorry to hear the news, so I put somebodys head through a window in primary school so, and then I left there and went to Exeter, er no Axminster, then went from Axminster to Exeter and then went from Exeter to Manchester and then Manchester to Plymouth, Plymouth to Salcombe, Salcombe to Marlborough, so and then Marlborough to Exeter, Exeter to London, Lewisham and then Lewisham to Exeter again and then Exeter and so...

[when she died] I was in East Allington in respite, I used to hate it. I hate social workers you know. And er I used to cry when my social worker used to leave, please don't go, please don't go, put me in your bag, take me with you, please, please, please. I used to beg my social worker to take me with her and she was like, no, no, no...

I used to share a room, and then at three o'clock in the morning all the other kids would come in and jump off the wardrobe onto me and all that shit, and I used to get battered you know, hit around the head with scooters and the respite carers didn't do fuck all, they didn't do nothing, grant you everybody has different experiences in care...

In these excerpts, Matthew recounts the trauma of losing his Nan and going into care. He continues his story:

The only time she'll [mum] tell me she loves me is when she's fucked

Conclusion

The PeN project challenges the notion of ‘prisoners’ and/or ‘offenders’ as a homogenous group, significantly it allows trainees to take ownership of their desistance journeys. Matthew’s blog posts on the PeN project website were co-produced between Matthew and me. They show a character looking to change, taking on all of the opportunities afforded to him at the RS. In his relationships with his extended family, staff, volunteers and other trainees at the RS he practices forms of generativity in order to make good (Maruna 2001). It is through these blog posts that his extended family or families including people at the RS and his probation worker, as well as the wider community, are able to bear witness to his attempts to reform a criminalised self (Anderson 2016, Parsons 2018b).

Matthew also clearly identifies the possibilities of a future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018). His photographs are open texts that enable a making and re-making of a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman 1963). However, Matthew has dealt with/is dealing with multiple traumas, not least the trauma of criminalisation and penalisation, which serves to amplify existing inequalities. His stories therefore represent a series of failings in terms of wider policies of social and criminal justice, which continue to position him on the outside looking in. Moreover, in terms of the cultural dominance of consumer capitalism, Matthew is far from able to participate in this. His rucksack of belongings is practically empty, he has no mobile phone. However, Matthew is also a survivor, he has learned how to judge people and practices forms of self-care in extraordinary circumstances, being in care and on the streets. In many ways he is resilient and resourceful, and his narratives provide examples of non-normative constructions of self, family, work, hope and success (Arrigo and Milovanovic 2009).

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